

# A ROW TO SACRAMENTO

with Ed DeCossio and Al Burke



by Mack McCaleb

**Wednesday, August 28, 1974**

At 06:10 A.M. left the Dolphin Club dock.

Daylight just breaking, moderately choppy on the Bay, and fresh westerly breeze blowing.

The double-banked boat, *The Lawton Hughes*, rose with the swells as we nosed out of Aquatic Park Cove.

Rowing stroke: Ed DeCossio, and Al Burke also at the oars, with Mack McCaleb in the stern at the tiller, was how we started. For the next four days of rowing, we alternated from two hours at the oars to one hour at the tiller.

For Ed DeCossio, the veteran-toughened oarsman, this was to be his nineteenth row from San Francisco to Sacramento. On previous trips up-river, sometimes Ed had company and at other times he was alone.

As we left the cove, the flood tide was just beginning to run and the westerly swell also shoved us along. We took off like a big-assed bird.

At 07:00, our boat the *Hughes* was entering Racoon Straits tide running strong with us, and we were bending the oars. Actually, we were not far from San Francisco, yet in another world.

We were acutely aware of other boats moving about in the bay and changing view of points of land and incessant sound as the rowing seats rode forward, then aft, as the two oarsmen bent to the oars.

At 08:20, passed under the Richmond/San Rafael Bridge and heading up San Pablo Bay. We still had a following wind and the incoming tide boosting us along. Sky was overcast and a misty haze hung over the bay. Our direction of rowing for the next couple of hours was determined by looking at the distant hills and the feel of the wind. It was quite a feeling of satisfaction when the upper structure of the Carquinez bridge was sighted. All of the lower section of the bridge was obscured by the low-lying misty haze. We had held a good course and were on the proper heading. I believe it was along about this time that DeCossio started singing "It's a long way to Sacramento, it's a long way to row. It's a long way to Sacramento — so row! row! row!"

Ed's chant was to the vaguely recognizable tune of "It's a Long Way to Tipperary."

At 11:53 a.m. we passed under the Carquinez Bridge. At 1:00 p.m. we snubbed the boat up alongside of the Benicia Main Dock. It was quite a relief to stand up in the boat and stretch arms and legs.

At 1:45 p.m. we had finished lunch and were again underway. At 2:00 p.m. passed under the Benicia Martinez Bridge. At 3:30 p.m. we were abeam of the Port Chicago Main Docks. At 6:45 p.m. our boat, the *Lawton Hughes* was tied up at the Pittsburg Marina. On this, our first day, we had been underway for 11 hours and 50 minutes and covered a distance of 40 nautical miles.

After that long day of fresh air and exercise, food from the supply we had brought seemed a delicious banquet. After

shooting the breeze for awhile with a boat owner whose boat was moored at the Marina, sleeping bags were laid out on the floats by the moorage.

Mac McCaleb was thinking — "tomorrow is my 66th birthday — what the hell am I doing out here?"<sup>1</sup> Also, I had a pleasant feeling of tiredness and satisfaction. As tired as we were, sleeping was no problem.

**2nd Day — August 29, 1974**

Had breakfast, stowed our gear in boat, and at 8:20 a.m. were again on our way. "It's a long way to Sacramento, it's a long way to row" Ed DeCossio was singing, if you could call it singing; anyway, it was a cheerful sound.

We did not take the shorter route from the Marina back out into the Northeast Reaches of Suisun Bay, but proceeded southeastward in New York slough and along the Pittsburgh docks. At 9:40 a.m. rounded the southeast corner of Winter Island and took a Northwest slant towards the Sacramento ship channel. At 10:50 a.m. we were abeam Buoy #10 and entered the Sacramento Ship Channel and were soon into the river. From 12:10 p.m. to 12:55 p.m. tied boat up along side a landing at a point between Buoys #22 and #24. The three of us took a most refreshing swim in the river. The weather was sunny and warm and water temperature must have been about 60°.

Much refreshed after lunch and swim. At 12:55 p.m. we rowed away with a carefree feeling of well-being. Since this was my birthday Al Burke said, "you can row an extra hour." Needless to say, I declined the most generous offer.

Mack McCaleb was the only one having trouble with his hands, which were developing blisters. Al Burke mentioned having a sore back, but Ed DeCossio, the iron man, would never admit to being tired or having sore muscles. The two hour stint of rowing frequently seemed a long, long time. The two men at the oars just stoically rowed and didn't do much yakking.

The one hour at the tiller seemed an all too brief period. The man at the tiller did most of the talking and this short time of relaxation seemed to bring on an exuberant feeling. While at the tiller on a couple of occasions, Al Burke rendered a couple of Irish songs — yeah, he rendered them, but they sounded pretty good anyway.

At about 3:30 p.m. (our 2nd day), we were standing by inquiring from harbor master at Rio Vista Marina about mooring boat for the night. Mrs. Korbel, a yacht owner and member of the Korbel wine family, was about to leave the marina in her cabin cruiser. She very graciously offered us the use of her boat moorage.

The Korbel moorage was sheltered and snug. At 3:45 p.m. the boat was secured for the night. This day we had rowed for only 6 hours and 4 minutes and traversed a distance of only 16 nautical miles, but it had been a pleasant and soul-satisfying day.

<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: Ed DeCossio is older!  
Al Burke is a youngster in his 40's!



At Rio Vista the three of us walked into town, had dinner at a cafe and browsed about town. That night we had a snug, sheltered place to lay our sleeping bags. After a day in the sunshine and fresh air, rowing and walking, and a good meal, sleep came quickly when we stretched out for the night.

### 3rd Day — Friday, August 30, 1974

At about 7:00 a.m. we were restowing gear in preparation for another day on the river. We again strolled into town and had a hearty breakfast. Returning to the Marina, chatted for awhile with some boating people who were quite interested in the boat *Lawton Hughes* and our row to Sacramento. We extolled the fine points of the boat and imparted quite a bit of information about the Dolphin Club, past and present.

At 9:30 a.m. we rowed away from the Rio Vista Marina. A few people were on the balcony at the Yacht Club watching us depart. I am sure that we presented a rather impressive picture as the two oarsmen smoothly bent to the oars and the *Hughes* glided thru the water.

Another fine, sunshiny day. Quite often we saw fish (probably bass) break the surface and plop back into the water. As usual, the man at the tiller did a lot of gabbing. The two men at the oars quietly rowed. The long hours of sitting were rough on our butts, but we were very happy and contented to be where we were. At 10:45 a.m. we nosed the boat into Steamboat Slough, getting out of the Sacramento River. A fascinating place, "Steamboat Slough," high banks on each side, covered with big, overhanging trees and brush, and occasionally a strip of sandy beach. Camp sites came into view — then slipped by. From a few big cottonwood trees, ropes were hanging down, with an old auto tire attached to the end, places for kids to swing and drop into the river. We began to see more cabin cruisers and a few houseboats, moored or slowly moving. In general, the power-boat operators were very considerate, slowing down as they approached us, hailing us, passing a few remarks, then picking up speed when far enough away not to swamp us. A couple of water skiers were not so thoughtful and caused us some concern. In the slough there was not too much tidal effect and we were mostly rowing against the current. Close to the river bank, the current ran less strong, especially in the straighter stretches of the river. Close by the banks we rowed. The man at the tiller was constantly looking out for snags and shoal water as we wended our way upriver.

12:00 Noon, stopped for lunch. Tied boat to a float at Snug Harbor landing on the bank of Ryer Island. Each of us had brought a few items of food which we shared. We had a crock of baked beans with bits of ham in it which was truly a gourmet item — or so it seemed.

At 1:00 p.m., again underway and proceeding northward through Steamboat Slough. Weather was sunny and comfortably warm. The feel of the sun on our bodies was very soothing.

At 3:55 p.m. abeam Steamboat Landing and re-entering the Sacramento River.

At 4:25 p.m. passed under Courtland Bridge. At 4:55 p.m. moored boat for night alongside of a float at Morgan landing. This day we had traversed 15½ nautical miles in rowing time of 5 hours and 25 minutes.

We each had a most enjoyable swim. As current was running strong, we swam one at a time and swam upstream while two men kept watch on the swimmer. We dried ourselves in the sun, thoroughly enjoying its warmth. Again had food from the supply we had brought along.

The town of Courtland was less than a mile away — so we strolled into town. That town is really a one-horse town, not even a Bank of America. Except for a Drug and General Store, the few shops were closed. We didn't at all care, for we were just out to stretch our legs and take a look-see. A dusty farming town is soothingly pleasant and quiet after a long stay in the San Francisco area. The slow stroll into town and back to Morgan's landing was a pleasant ending to a pleasant day.

When darkness closed in, we were snug and secure in our sleeping bags. Ed and Al racked up in boats secured at the landing. Mack laid out his sleeping bag under the shelter of an old shack on the bank of the river.

Mack's hands were blistered and some muscles were sore. Lying in the sleeping bag, listening to the night sounds, it wasn't long until he drifted off to pleasant, sound sleep.

### 4th Day — Saturday, August 31, 1974

At the first beginning of dawn Ed DeCossio was bustling about. "It's a notso longa way to Sacramento — let's go! let's go!" Ed was warbling.

At a little restaurant just above the landing, we had a hearty breakfast.

7:55 a.m., left Morgan Landing and proceeded up river, another day of fair weather.

11:15 arrived at Clarksburg Landing and secured boat. We each took a swim, following the usual procedure of swimming up stream, and one at a time. Current was swift and we each got a good workout while only covering a short distance.

After the refreshing swim, we had lunch at a small restaurant located near the landing. Ed DeCossio was exuberant and talkative as he reminisced with the restaurant operator. Ed had stopped at that landing on a couple of previous trips on the river. A couple of canteens were returned to Ed — canteens he had forgotten to pick up on a previous trip.

At 1:20 p.m., we shoved off, again rowing upstream. This P.M. we were startled by an unusually large fish that broke the water near the boat and hit the surface with a loud p-l-o-p. The fish looked to be four feet or more long; what kind of fish was it, we wondered? Probably a bass? We didn't know. Another momentary glimpse; while rowing quietly near the bank, Al Burke went p-s-s-t, and pointed. There on a strip of sand in the sun, with a background of bushes and trees, were two nude forms — a man and a woman — basking in the sunshine. They did not see us and we did not disturb them; what a picture of serene contentment.

3:15 p.m., passed under Freeport Bridge. Several people on passing boats hailed us, having recognized the Dolphin Club Boat. These boats were from Sacramento and yachting people knew Ed DeCossio and about his previous trips from San Francisco to Sacramento. A couple of boat operators, in hailing us, said "See you at the Yacht Club," referring to the Sacramento Yacht Club. Regrettably, we were not to make it all the way up to the club.

6:50 p.m., boat moored to float at Da Rosa Marina — on the outskirts of Sacramento. This day we had traversed 21½ nautical miles and been underway for 8 hours and 50 minutes.

On the trip up from San Francisco we had rowed 93 nautical miles (+ distance back and forth across channels) and had been underway for 32 hours and 45 minutes. Computed on the above, our average speed was 2.84 kts. Mack McCaleb, having been a seafaring man for many long years, just had to note time underway, distance, and average speed.

We would have liked to linger longer, but Al Burke had to return to San Francisco and his work. Did a bit of socializing at the Da-Rosa Marine Clubhouse, had some food and again hit the sleeping bags.

### Fifth day — Sunday, September 1, 1974

At 9:30 a.m. boat and our gear was stowed and lashed in a panel U-Haul truck.

10:00 a.m., underway for San Francisco.

1:30 p.m., the boat *Lawton Hughes* again stowed in the boathouse at Dolphin Club.

End of memorable adventure. All three of us were much in need of a bath, but feeling fit and happy about completing the trip. Memories of the summery days on the bay, slough and river will forever be a part of us three.